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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN SERBIA: SEPERATIST RALLY FIZZLES

¶1. SUMMARY: A June 15 rally in southern Serbia calling for the separation of three municipalities from Serbia (and joining with Kosovo) drew much lower numbers of participants than expected. Political leaders in the area were divided, and in the end none of the political leaders addressed the crowd of about 200. The Ambassador's interview on an Albanian-language television station -- during which he spoke out strongly against such separatist ambitions -- aired the evening before the protest and was cited by local OSCE representatives as a factor in the protest's poor showing. The situation in the south, however, is another factor we must consider in a possible delay of Kosovo status settlement. Similarly to Kosovo itself, every day without a settlement is a day of possible mischief by self-serving and irresponsible politicians that can ignite broader conflict. END SUMMARY.

¶2. Several weeks ago, veterans of the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac (UCPMB) announced a rally in Presevo on June 15 with the stated aim of calling for the implementation of an unsanctioned 1992 referendum in favor of splitting the three municipalities from Serbia and joining Kosovo. The UCPMB was a paramilitary active in southern Serbia in 2002 with separatist ambitions. Publicity materials for the protest referred to the region as "eastern Kosovo," a term often used by the UCPMB and other hard-line groups.

¶3. Political parties in the region were split along the same lines as during the decision to participate in Serbian parliamentary elections in January 2007. Hard-line parties of the mayor of Presevo, Ragmi Mustafa and deputy mayor of Bujanovac, Jonuz Musliu, supported the initiative. Member of Parliament Riza Halimi and Dr. Skender Destani, who supported election participation, were publicly against the effort.

¶4. The Ambassador gave an interview to 'TV ALDI,' a new Albanian-language station based in Presevo on June 13 and made clear that the aims of the UCPMB, Mustafa and Musliu are directly opposed to USG principles. He urged Presevo Valley Albanians to build on their success in the January 2007 elections by sending Halimi to Belgrade as their representative. The interview aired on the evening of June 14 throughout the Presevo Valley.

¶5. The protest itself fizzled, drawing only 200 (at most) and with none of the political leaders addressing the group. Mustafa and Musliu did attend the protest. Local OSCE representatives reported speeches by UCPMB veterans "advocating joining with Kosovo and calling on NATO to pay attention to the Presevo Valley." The OSCE office also noted that the organizers "were undoubtedly expecting

considerably more participants than turned up," and the Ambassador's interview "assisted in minimizing the impact of this protest."

16. Comment: The situation along the ABL in the Presevo Valley remains calm but necessitates monitoring. Despite this rally's failure, there remain significant divisions among the 60,000 ethnic Albanians living in southern Serbia about whether engagement or protest is the way to resolve their concerns with Belgrade. Halimi is doing very well as an MP advocating for his constituents within Serbia's democratic institutions and his brave stance against this rally coupled with USG support is proving a good basis for greater stability. The Presevo Valley, however, is another factor we must consider in a possible delay of Kosovo status settlement. Similarly to Kosovo itself, every day without a Kosovo settlement is a day of possible mischief by self-serving and irresponsible politicians that can ignite into broader conflict.

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